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Current Literature

Edited by EDWARD J. WHEELER

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"THE MOST PERFECT RULER OF MEN THE WORLD HAS EVER SEEN"

The words above were uttered at the bedside of Abraham Lincoln by his Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton. They form the keynote of a new life of Lincoln written for the express purpose of bringing out this element of Lincoln's greatness—his wonderful mastery of men. It was a mastery that displayed itself in all its power upon such subjects as Douglas, McClellan, Stanton, Seward, Fremont and Chase, and in concentrating our attention upon this element in the Lincoln personality, an element rendered increasingly significant as year succeeds year, we have, contends Mr. Alonzo Rothschild, in his biography,* the dominant fact of Lincoln's career. Yet the greatest of all the men upon whom this mastery was exercised —Abraham Lincoln himself—received no adequate credit for any such capacity from the multitude who yielded to it. They thought, so far as they thought of it at all, that Lincoln was weak. Time never wholly eradicated that notion at any stage of his administration, though the more discerning few realized the truth, and some even tried to account for it.

This man of the people, writes Mr. Rothschild, owed something of that subtle, indefinable force which issued in mastery over his fellow man to mere physique. And we are afforded this comparison between the tall Sumner and the tall Lincoln:

"Sumner, whether he gave to the world an oration with carefully studied pose and gesture, or privately employed his powers of persuasion in furthering one of the lofty aims of his career, was ever conscious of the advantage that lay in his commanding figure and he improved it to the utmost. Lincoln, rarely, if ever, self-conscious, made no such application of his strength and stature; but the exhibitions of them that he scattered through his life abundantly manifest his half-serious, half-joking sense of their importance. This appreciation of a superiority, purely physical, by leaders so unlike in temperament and training, is sufficient to warrant the attention that has been given to a seemingly unessential matter. Moreover, it is no mere coincidence that the three most forceful personalities that have directed the fortunes of the American people from the President's chair were embodied in frames of uncommon size and vigor. Their habits of command, confirmed early in life by ability to enforce their wishes, armed them with the irresistible powers of control by means of which they triumphed in great crises of our nation's history. The heaviest demands of this nature were, beyond a question, laid upon Abraham Lincoln, and he, consistently enough, was, of all the Presidents, the tallest."

Lincoln's mastery of self became, with the progress of time, well-nigh absolute. It needed to be wholly so, suspects our biographer, to carry President Lincoln through the ordeal of his cross-purposes with McClellan. This "smart young general," as Mr. Rothschild terms him, had been at no pains to conceal an overweening contempt for Lincoln and his civilian advisers. It required all the forbearance of the executive head of the United States Government to prevent an explosion of indignation throughout the whole administration circle at the attitude of cavalier disdain manifested by McClellan. Here are some instances:

"Mr. Lincoln had made it a practice, from the beginning, to pay informal visits at McClellan's headquarters. Waiving, with characteristic self-surrender, all questions of etiquette, he hoped thus to keep in touch with military affairs at the least possible expenditure of the General's time. Before breakfast, or after supper, as the case might be, the President would arrive with some such greeting as 'Is George in?' And it became a matter of comment that, if George was in, he did not always receive his distinguished caller promptly. Seemingly unconscious of any discourtesy, Mr. Lincoln waited with unruffled good humor in McClellan's reception room, among the 'other common mortals,' as one indignant chronicler expressed it, until the oracle was pleased to have him admitted.

"More vehement still must have been the rage of a White House clerk, who tells us how he accompanied his chief, one evening, to the headquarters in H Street. 'We are seated,' he writes, 'and the President's arrival has been duly announced, but time is being given him to think over what he came for. General McClellan is probably very busy over some important detail of his vast duties, and he cannot tear himself away from it at once. A minute passes and then another and then another and with every tick of the clock upon the mantel your blood warms nearer and nearer its boiling point. Your face feels hot and your fingers tingle as you look at the man sitting so patiently over there whom you regard as the Titan and hero of the hour; and you try to master your rebellious consciousness that he is kept waiting, like an applicant in an ante-room.'

"On another occasion, Secretary Seward had the honor of sharing a snub with the President. Calling together at headquarters, one evening, they were told that the General was out but would soon return. After they had waited in the reception room almost an hour, McClellan came back. Disregarding the orderly who had told him about his visitors, he went directly up-stairs. Whereupon Mr. Lincoln, thinking that perhaps

*LINCOLN: MASTER OF MEN. A Study in Character. By Alonzo Rothschild. Houghton, Mifflin and Company.

he had not been announced, sent up his name; but the messenger returned with the information that the General had gone to bed.

"It is doubtful whether the President ever required or received an explanation of this gross misbehavior. There was no appreciable change in his friendly attitude toward McClellan."

These were a few of the many occasions upon which Lincoln effaced himself. His self-mastery had extinguished personal vanity—so far as personal vanity means the sense of self-importance—within him. Otherwise he never could have asserted a mastery over Seward. Seward thought himself (and the country thought him) the power behind the throne. That view lingered long after Lincoln's first inauguration. Seward at first entirely misconceived the President's character. The homely simplicity with which Lincoln had borne himself when visited at "his secluded abode" before his inauguration, the candor with which he acknowledged his deficiencies and the meekness with which he listened to innumerable advisers, bidden or otherwise, left most of the politicians firm in the opinion that the conduct of the administration would be in the hands of Lincoln's strongest secretary. This widespread notion of the President's weakness was a favorite one with Seward, who at the same time concurred in the general estimate of his own superiority. And Mr. Rothschild adds:

"In the whirl of events, the Secretary's dazzled vision mistook the President's lack of knowledge for incapacity; his indecision for executive incompetence; his modesty for weakness. The Ship of State seemed to be drifting on to the rocks and a stronger hand—so thought Mr. Seward—was needed, forthwith, at the helm. He had embarked in the administration with the expectation of directing its course. The notion had apparently been confirmed not only by public opinion but also by the deference with which the President treated him."

So Mr. Seward wrote to Mr. Lincoln to the effect (as our biographer summarizes the documents in the case) that the new President was unequal to his duties and should turn over the most important of them to a sort of dictator. It was a communication, opines Mr. Rothschild, which could have been addressed by Seward only to a President whom he believed to be totally lacking in strength of character. His error was corrected without delay. The President, with his customary disregard of self, ignored the insult, and as to the exercise of absolute authority remarked: "If this must be done, I must do it." Thus ended Mr. Seward's dream of domination:

"All his romantic notions of saving the country through his own capacity, so freely expressed in confidential letters to his wife, had to be revised, and we find him presently writing to her: 'Executive skill and vigor are rare qualities. The President is the best of us.' In the public eye, however, the Secretary still held sway. . . .

"No one, it is safe to say, appreciated the Secretary at his true value so accurately as the President. In his admiration of Mr. Seward, he overlooked the mistakes, supplemented the important labors, on occasion, with necessary touches of his own shrewd common sense, and kept the brilliant talents employed for the best interests of the country. . . .

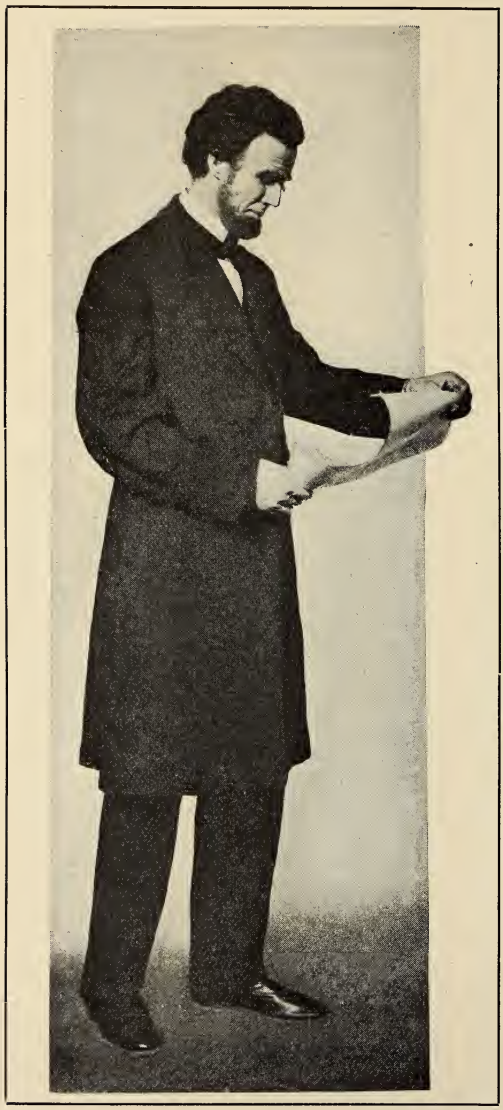
"Small wonder that the respect which the Secretary had early learned to show his chief became mingled with a warmth of personal devotion that has not, in similar relations of our history, been surpassed. Renouncing his own aspirations, Mr. Seward dedicated himself without reserve, to the President's political fortunes, as well as to the success of his administration, so far as it might be achieved by the State Department."

Lincoln held his Secretary of the Treasury, Salmon P. Chase, by a free rein, writes Mr. Rothschild. But there were times when Chase got out of hand. Then the lines stiffened and one masterful twist of the wrist brought the Secretary back to his work. Like Seward, Chase was made to feel the power that lurked in Lincoln's slack hand. Unlike Seward, Chase never became reconciled to the sway. From the very outset, the man at the head of the Treasury chafed under whatever limitations were placed upon his authority. It was in vain. Chase, says Mr. Rothschild, never entirely forgave Lincoln the latter's victory at the Chicago convention that nominated the candidate for the presidency of their mutual party. That a man so markedly his inferior in education and public achievements should have been preferred to himself was as grievous to the Ohio statesman's self-love as it was irritating to his sense of equity. That this man, moreover, when he came to the presidency should persist in actually running the administration while his brilliant Secretary of the Treasury—so willing at every turn to relieve him of the burden—remained merely head of a department, hardly allayed the statesman's resentment. The prejudice engendered in the defeated candidate took deeper root in the disappointed Cabinet minister. Mr. Chase's failures, withal, to sway the President in many important matters filled him with amazement. The character, or fancied character, of the chief who overruled him made his cup of subordination doubly bitter. The masterful Chase had met his master, says Mr. Rothschild, yet he could not bring himself to

the point of admitting it. The men were not in sympathy.

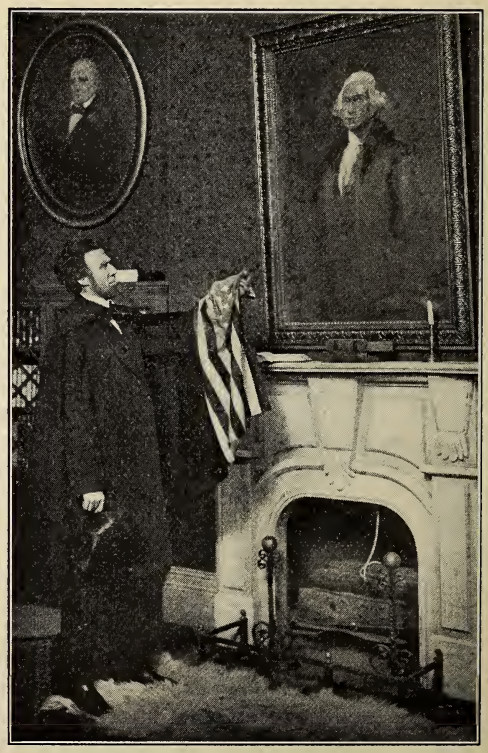
"One rarely finds two public men working together so earnestly for the triumph of the same principles who are, at once, so essentially dissimilar in social attributes as they happened to be. Lincoln's ways—unconventional in the extreme—grated upon the sensibilities of the dignified Chase. To the Secretary's fondness for forms, pride of intellect, distaste for humor, and serious, almost ascetic devotion to his tasks, must be ascribed, in a degree at least, the absence of cordiality between him and a President who made no secret of his ignorance, troubled himself not a whit about precedents and was reminded, on all conceivable occasions, of stories hardly constructed according to classic models. Not the least of Lincoln's offenses against the Chesterfield of his Cabinet was the ill-concealed amusement with which he regarded that gentleman's displeasure at his levity. The President's bump of reverence appears to have been so exceedingly flat that the frowns of an important personage, however great, failed to abash him. Mr. Chase once told with evident disgust, how an old-time crony of Lincoln in the Thirtieth Congress was permitted to interrupt a meeting of the Cabinet. That body was in session one day when the doorkeeper announced that Orlando Kellogg was without and wished to tell the President the story of the stuttering justice. Mr. Lincoln ordered the visitor to be ushered in immediately. Greeting Kellogg at the threshold with a warm grasp of the hand, the President said, as he turned to his Cabinet:

"'Gentlemen, this is my old friend, Orlando Kellogg, and he wants to tell us the story of the stuttering justice. Let us lay all business aside, for it is a good story.'



READING THE EMANCIPATION PROCLAMATION

Of Chapin's Lincoln, the New York *Evening Post* declares: "Those who most deeply venerate the memory of Lincoln would find nothing to wound them in this respectful attempt at his re-embodiment.



"YOU GAVE US THIRTEEN STARS"

Lincoln a stranger to his biographers. Benjamin Chapin here interprets the Lincoln of whom it has been said that no man hid more innate solemnity with more outward comicality.

BENJAMIN CHAPIN'S IMPERSONATIONS

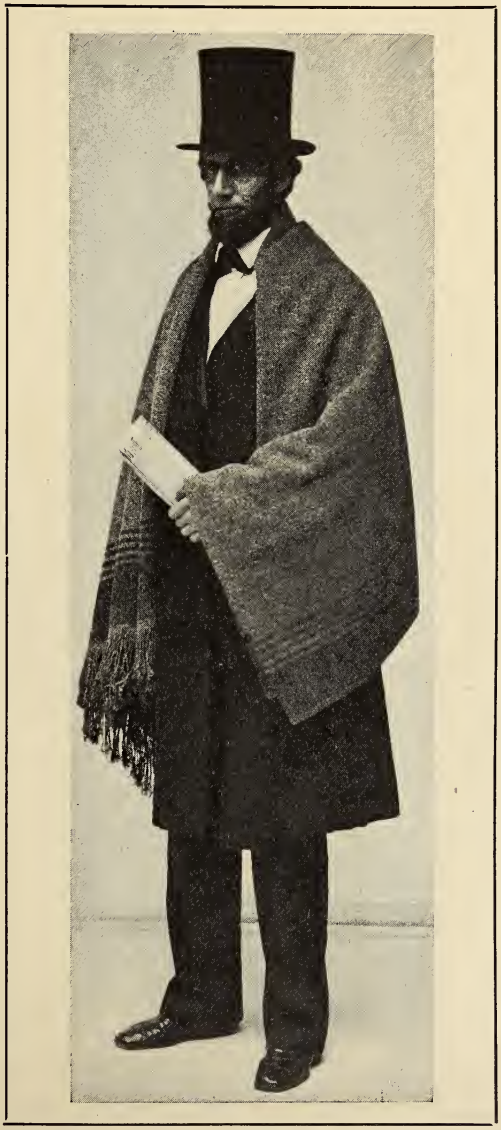
"So statesmen as well as affairs of state waited while the humorous Kellogg spun his yarn and Lincoln had his laugh.

"In strong contrast to the distant relations between Lincoln and Chase was the cordial good fellowship which the President evinced toward Seward. The Secretary of State appears to have been especially congenial to his chief. For Mr. Lincoln, of all men, could appreciate a cabinet minister who, whatever may have been his failings, submitted loyally, in the main, to superior authority, fomented no quarrels and adapted a cheery, resourceful disposition, with rare felicity, to the President's moods. Seward's influence with Lincoln was notably greater than that of Chase—greater, in fact, than that of any of his colleagues; but not nearly so great, be it said, as was at the time generally believed. Great or small, however, the prestige thus enjoyed by the Secretary of State became particularly galling to the man in the Treasury."

Edwin McMasters Stanton was the third member of what Mr. Rothschild pronounces Lincoln's great Cabinet triad. It would be difficult to convey an adequate idea of the boundless contempt for Lincoln with which Stanton fairly ached in 1861. According to at least two chroniclers, he alluded to the President as "a low, cunning clown." According to another he referred to Mr. Lincoln as the "original gorilla," and "often said that Du Chaillu was a fool to wander all the way to Africa in search of what he could so easily have found at Springfield, Ill." No one who knew Stanton courted an encounter with him. Only a master of masters, says Mr. Rothschild, could control such an embodiment of force.

SLEEPLESS BENEATH A LOAD OF CARE

Lincoln's gauntness in his closing year of life—a gauntness made effective in Benjamin Chapin's impersonation—is attributed in part to his lack of opportunities to get to bed.



TALLEST OF ALL THE PRESIDENTS

There is an appropriateness between Lincoln's physical size and his mastery of men, says his latest biographer, Alfred Rothschild. Benjamin Chapin's success as "Lincoln" is attributed in part to the actor's height.

OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN IN WAR TIME

At the time of his appointment as Secretary of War Stanton had manifested most, if not all, of his extraordinarily vitriolic traits. They boded no good for the Cabinet nor for the President's authority. So thought the friends who warned Mr. Lincoln that nothing could be done with such a man unless he were allowed to have his own way. They appeared to have abundant ground, moreover, for their comforting prediction that "Stanton would run away with the whole concern." Strangely enough, the President showed no alarm:

"The ability and self-sacrificing patriotism with which the appointee administered, from the outset, the affairs of his office, secured to him the President's unreserved confidence. 'I have faith,' said Mr. Lincoln, speaking of the new minister and another, 'in affirmative men like these. They stand between a nation and perdition.' He not only permitted Mr. Stanton largely to control the details of the War Department, but in matters of general policy as well he frequently deferred to that officer's judgment. Men of such dissimilar temperaments, however, working together toward a common end in wholly unlike ways, naturally had frequent differences of opinion. Their very earnestness bred trouble. Mr. Stanton, moreover, conducting his department solely with regard to military requirements, could not fail to clash with a President who had to face the complex problems of a Civil War in their political as well as their strategic aspects. But Mr. Lincoln fathomed the man with whom he had to deal. When a misunderstanding arose he ignored the Secretary's flashes of temper and fixed his attention on the question at issue. Indeed, the President exercised tact enough for both of them."

The irritability to which Stanton was addicted contrasted strongly with a playfulness always characteristic of Lincoln in his management of the ebullient Secretary of War. Up to his eyes in affairs, much in love with the authority of his official position, Stanton would say to those who interrupted him with written orders from the President: "I will not do it. Go right back to the President and say I refuse to obey!" The geniality with which Lincoln tolerated his insubordinate subordinate did not affect the inflexibility of the presidential will. Mr. Lincoln would deferentially insinuate that the authority of the President of the United States was a fact. Nor did Stanton succeed in ignoring the fact. Obstinate as Stanton was, the fact was more so. A mind less conscious of its mastery than Lincoln's might have inflicted upon Stanton a personal humiliation in overruling him. Not once, however, did Lincoln offend the spirit he subdued.

Stanton's distrust, even contempt, of Lincoln in 1861 had given way by 1865, says Mr. Rothschild, to entirely different sentiments. Like his associates in the Cabinet, with possibly one exception, the Secretary of War had correctly gaged the President's intellectual and moral force. That this force, when exerted to the full, was well-nigh irresistible he had painfully learned by repeated but unsuccessful strivings to get his own way. No one had ever so worsted Edwin M. Stanton. He was outclassed. With his increasing respect for Mr. Lincoln's power came, naturally enough, something like a fair appreciation of the President's lofty character. Such magnanimity, devotion to duty and homely sincerity could have but one effect upon a man of Stanton's intense nature. He began with reviling Lincoln. He ended with loving him. Stanton, the lion-hearted Secretary of War, could achieve this moral thing. Nevertheless, Stanton needed a sharp word now and then. But Stanton got to know that Lincoln was a master of men:

"Secretary Stanton's temperament rendered him anything but an easy instrument in any man's hand. His very faults partook of the rugged strength which, viewed at this distance, makes him stand out as the Titan of Lincoln's Cabinet. That the President controlled so turbulent a force without sacrificing aught of its energy was, perhaps, his highest achievement in the field of mastership. This was due, primarily, of course, to his insight into Stanton's character. Few men, if any, had fathomed as truly the sterling qualities that lay beneath the failings of the great Secretary. For the real Stanton revealed himself to the President in the daily—at times hourly—meetings imposed upon them by the requirements of the war. Together they bore the anxieties and shared the joys of the struggle. Their co-operation in the absorbing work to which both had dedicated themselves established between the men, dissimiliar as they were by nature, a bond of sympathy which even Stanton's headiness could not destroy. Indeed, Mr. Lincoln, treating the Secretary somewhat as a parent would a talented but high-strung child—now humoring, now commanding—appears to have risen above even a shadow of personal resentment and to have overlooked an occasional opposition that, however violent might have been its outbursts, always yielded in the end to his authority. . . .

"A notable group watched around the bed on which he [Lincoln] breathed his last. Among all the public men in the sorrowing company, no grief was keener than that of his iron war minister. None of them had tested, as Edwin M. Stanton had, the extraordinary resources of the stricken chief. It was fitting, therefore, that he, as 'passed the strong, heroic soul away,' should pronounce its eulogy:

"'There lies the most perfect ruler of men the world has ever seen.'"